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AUTHOR Gonzalez, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

External, employment, and personal factors which influence teacher decisions to stay, leave, or transfer from teaching assignments are discussed, with emphasis on special education teachers. Factors attributed to teacher attrition in urban and rural environments also are briefly reviewed, along with attrition of related services professionals. External factors affecting teachers include economic trends, societal factors such as changing birth rates, and institutional factors. Employment-related variables include professional qualifications, work conditions, work rewards, and commitment. Personal factors encompass demographic, family, and cognitive/affective variables. The following aspects of district or school environments have been found to be associated with teacher attrition: lack of administrative support, lack of collegial and parent support, and insufficient involvement in decision-making. Factors linked to job dissatisfaction among related service professionals (including speech/language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, and school psychologists) in school settings include salary, inadequate work and/or office space, inadequate equipment or materials, excessive caseloads, limited staff development, and isolation from colleagues. (Contains 17 references.) (SW)

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NSTEP INFORMATION BRIEF
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Factors That Influence Teacher Attrition

By Patricia Gonzalez, Ph.D.
Networking System for Training Education Personnel

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Factors That Influence Teacher Attrition

Introduction

The *Sixteenth Annual Report to Congress* (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) noted that, despite annual increases in the number of special education teachers, states reported in 1991-92 needing 27,282 additional FTE teachers to fill funded vacancies and to replace teachers who were not adequately trained. This figure marks a 1.3 percent increase in the number of teachers needed in 1990-91. While there are a number of contributing factors to special education teacher supply/demand imbalances[1], one cause is attrition.

Billingsley (1993) described two types of attrition. *Transfer attrition* includes those teachers who transfer to other special education positions within or outside a particular school or district, as well as those who transfer to general education either in the same or a different school or district. In the former case, the transfer represents a loss to the school or district, but not to the field of special education. Conversely, *exit attrition* connotes a separation from teaching, such as non-teaching employment, retirement, returning to school, or non-teaching employment in schools (e.g., counseling or administration).

Teacher attrition rates reported in national and state studies have varied widely (Billingsley, 1993); however, attrition in special education has been found to be consistently higher than in general education. The term, *retention*, refers to "stayers"--teachers who remain in the same teaching assignment, in the same school as in the previous year. While the terms defined here are commonly used, numerous definitions can be found in the literature on attrition and retention--a fact that complicates comparison of attrition rates and other findings across studies.

The purposes of this report are to identify some of the factors found in research to be associated with teacher attrition (with an emphasis, where possible, on special education teachers). Factors attributed to teacher attrition in urban and rural environments also will be briefly reviewed, as will the attrition literature for related services professionals. Strategies that promote the retention of special education personnel will be addressed in a future *Information Brief* from the Networking System for Training Education Personnel.

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[1] See Smith-Davis & Billingsley (1993) or Smith-Davis (1992) for a discussion of issues.

Factors That Contribute to Attrition

Factors associated with attrition will be discussed here using the model introduced by Billingsley (1993). She suggests that teachers' career decisions (i.e., to stay, transfer, or exit) are influenced by *external*, *employment*, and *personal* factors.

External Factors Related to Attrition

External factors include societal, economic, and institutional variables that are external to the teacher and the employing school district. Many of these variables are not easily amenable to intervention. Examples of external factors include (a) economic trends (e.g., recessions, labor market trends); (b) societal factors (e.g., changing birth rates, regional population shifts); and (c) institutional factors (e.g., particularly strong preservice programs that instill a high degree of commitment, the successes/failures of teacher union objectives, regulations promulgated by federal/state agencies). Although little research has been conducted on the impact of external factors on career decisions, they obviously could influence the employment or personal circumstances that affect teacher attrition and retention (Billingsley, 1993; Brownell & Smith, 1993).

Employment Factors Related to Attrition

A second aspect of Billingsley's model incorporates four major employment factors that have both direct and indirect effects on career choice: *professional qualifications, work conditions, work rewards, and commitment*. Work-related variables have been shown to be predictors of commitment and job satisfaction which, in turn, are associated with retention (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1994).

Few attrition or retention studies involving special education teachers have looked at *professional qualifications*; consequently, most of the factors cited are associated with general educators (Billingsley, 1993). One factor positively associated with **retention** in some studies is strong preparation programs (as indicated by "satisfaction" ratings of graduates). Prior work experience also supports teacher retention (i.e., more experienced special education teachers are less likely to leave [Singer, 1993a], and in cases where they do leave, more likely to return to teaching at a later date [Singer, 1993b]). Research has shown a positive relationship between initial employment experiences and teacher retention (Billingsley, 1993). Beginning teachers encounter similar problems, including discipline concerns, parent difficulties, and inadequate or insufficient materials. These are shared by special educators in addition to collaboration needs, mastery of IEP requirements, and supervision of paraprofessionals. In recognition of the difficulties faced by beginning teachers, 34 states have implemented programs to meet these needs (Furtwengler, 1995). Other retention factors within the category of *professional qualifications* include certification in the area taught and **lower** scores on the National Teacher Exam and/or the Scholastic Aptitude Test.

Considerably more information via the research literature is available concerning attrition factors related to *work conditions*. Work conditions, including job rewards, are variables that interact to influence job satisfaction, and ultimately, the decision to stay in or leave the teaching profession. For example, unsupportive work environments or problems with work assignments lead to feelings of stress or burnout among special educators (Billingsley & Cross, 1991).

The following aspects of district or school environments have been found to be associated with teacher attrition (Billingsley, 1993): (a) lack of administrative support (identified by former teachers in both general and special education); (b) lack of collegial and parent support (the research results for special education teachers are mixed); and (c) insufficient involvement in decision making (may be more of a factor for certain personality types).

District and school factors directly or indirectly affect work assignments, which in turn have been shown to influence job satisfaction and career decisions. Attrition factors cited in the literature under the general category of "work assignments" encompass:

- teaching at the secondary level (elementary teachers stay longer, [Singer, 1993a])
- teachers working with students with emotional problems, speech/language, or vision impairments (Singer, 1993a)
- student discipline problems and lack of progress (Billingsley & Cross, 1991)
- role overload, conflict or ambiguity (research with special educators is just beginning [see Brownell & Smith, 1993])
- excessive paperwork or meetings (cited most often in studies with special educators)
- large class sizes or caseloads

Work rewards constitutes another employment factor affecting attrition. Intrinsic rewards such as positive experiences with students, and recognition and appreciation from colleagues, parents, and principals play a key role in increased job satisfaction. External, or monetary rewards, also are important and low salaries have been cited as a reason for attrition (e.g., Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1988). Of course, rewards are highly individualized and greatly influenced by personality factors.

Commitment is the fourth employment factor in Billingsley's (1993) model of influences on teacher career decisions. This factor not only influences retention, but the quality of performance as well. Research suggests that the higher the commitment, the higher the likelihood that an individual will remain in teaching. Commitment is an outgrowth of other factors in this model including professional qualifications, work conditions, work rewards and personal factors.

Personal Factors Related to Attrition

Personal factors make up the final component in the model and encompass demographic, family, and cognitive/affective variables. Among *demographic* variables, the age of the teacher is the

most consistent correlate of attrition with teachers under the age of 35 posing the greatest attrition risk. Although the research results are mixed, it appears that in special education young female teachers leave the classroom at a higher rate and return at the same rate as male teachers (Singer, 1993b). The role of race as a factor in attrition is not clear; however, teachers who are racially different from the majority of their students appear to be at great risk for attrition (Brownell & Smith, 1993).

Family factors account for a significant amount of attrition in both general and special education. Marriage, birth of children, and relocation are often cited reasons for termination or interruption of a teaching career, particularly in the early years. Research in general education teacher attrition also showed that persons from higher socio-economic classes are at greater risk for leaving the profession (Billingsley, 1993).

Although it is easy to see that cognitive/affective variables, such as interests, expectations, motivations, and/or personality would affect teachers' career decisions, these factors have rarely been studied. A study by Brownell, Smith, & Lenk (1993) focusing on special educators suggests that teachers who remain in the classroom enter the profession with more successful coping strategies and higher degrees of teacher efficacy.

Summary: Snapshot of Teacher Attrition Factors

Singly or in concert, research has identified the following elements of teacher attrition:

The Teacher:

- young (≤ 30 yrs)
- female
- high scores on teacher exam
- mid to upper SES
- little experience
- low level commitment to teaching
- ineffective coping strategies

The Environment:

- high school teaching assignment
- SED or speech assignment
- high class size/caseload
- unsupportive administrator
- excessive paperwork
- ambiguous or conflicting role demands
- few job rewards
- lack of decision making opportunities

Teacher Attrition Factors Attributable to Urban/Rural Environments

Urban and rural environments are associated with certain stressors on teacher retention. Some of the factors discussed above are compounded in urban and or rural environments--in other cases new and different factors come into play.

Urban settings. The following factors are consistent with high teacher turnover in urban schools: limited classroom resources (e.g., books, paper), greater bureaucratic restraints, large class sizes or caseloads, and students with significant social or behavioral problems. The negative influences of these factors are compounded when considering that urban schools must function with proportionately more new and uncertified instructors (Ascher, 1992) than rural and suburban schools.

Rural settings. Stern (1994) reviewed the research on teacher attrition in rural environments and identified the following considerations: low salaries or poor benefits; multiple teaching assignments (i.e., more than one subject, particularly in secondary schools); and little control over school policy. Interestingly, in the research done thus far, rural teachers were not found to have appreciably smaller class sizes or to differ markedly from their non-rural peers in expressions of job satisfaction/dissatisfaction. However, rural teachers were identified as having less professional preparation than teachers in other settings.

Issues in the Retention of Related Services Professionals

The data on attrition of related services professionals, including speech/language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and school psychologists is sketchy, and to some extent, contradictory. For example, Singer (1993a) found that professionals providing support services were at the greatest risk for leaving the schools. More recently, a study on teacher attrition completed in the Memphis city schools found that the exit rates of speech pathologists did not differ significantly from other special education teachers (Pyecha & Levine, 1995). Despite variable attrition data, the recruitment and retention of related service personnel remains an issue due to the pervasive need for and the limited supply of such personnel throughout the country.

A number of factors have been linked to job dissatisfaction among related service professionals in school settings, including a) salary, b) inadequate work and/or office space, c) inadequate equipment or materials, d) excessive caseloads, e) limited staff development, and f) isolation from colleagues (Goldberg, 1993; Whitworth, 1994). Many of these elements are different from those identified in the teacher attrition literature and require different interventions. Since school settings must compete with other agencies (e.g., hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, residential facilities) for related service personnel, it is important that schools provide environments that attract and retain these professionals by addressing reasons for leaving the profession, as well as the setting.

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